

Memphis School of Excellence (MSE) Brief Statement

On September 17, 2019, the Shelby County Board of Education voted to deny the Memphis School of Excellence Cordova (6-12) application to replicate a middle and high school in the Cordova neighborhood of Memphis. The denial of MSE's charter school application is contrary to the best interests of the pupils and community of Cordova for the following primary reasons:

- Despite Cordova public middle schools being under-enrolled, there are a significant number of public school seats that do not meet the quality threshold as measured by Shelby County Schools' (SCS's) internally-developed performance framework.
- MSE will offer parents and students access to a small school setting that is currently not available in Cordova public middle and high schools.
- MSE will implement a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)-focused academic program.
- MSE has a long and sustained track record of academic, operational, and financial success.
- As scored by SCS charter application reviewers, MSE's charter school application met or exceeded all requirements set forth in the Tennessee Department of Education's Application for a Public Charter School applying to open in the 2020-21 school year.

Under Enrollment

The sole cause of MSE's denial is anchored in SCS Board Policy #1011, Section VI, B. 5, which was passed in July 2019 – three months after the original submission and receipt of feedback about MSE's application. This policy states, "the district shall consider whether the establishment of a proposed charter school in a particular geographic location of the LEA is feasible or will create oversaturation in the proposed geographic location." On MSE's application scoring rubric, SCS explains, "According to the most recent strategic regional analysis, the Cordova neighborhood has a current student capacity of 5,421 seats and 4,581 students enrolled in 6-12; this means the East region is oversaturated in 6-12 by 840 seats."

More specifically, there are currently two traditional public middle schools and one traditional public high school in Cordova. While the high school is over-enrolled, with a building utilization of 108%, the two middle schools are under-enrolled, with an average building utilization of 69%. However, according to SCS's School Performance by Region Analysis¹, as well as by quality metrics that were internally developed by SCS, a significant number of traditional public-school seats in Cordova fall below the quality threshold. More specifically, there are 4,581 students enrolled in traditional public schools in Cordova; per SCS, 66.5% of these seats are low quality, which equates to 3,046 total low-quality seats across Cordova traditional public elementary, middle, and high schools. To quantify at the middle and high school levels, which are the grades MSE seeks to serve, there are 785 low-quality traditional public middle seats and 2,261 low-quality seats at the traditional public high school. Given the significant amount of low-quality seats as determined by SCS, MSE will not only alleviate the problem of over-enrollment at the high school but also provide students and families with access to a high-quality option as evidenced by MSE's long and sustained track record of academic, operational, and financial success, which is subsequently discussed in further detail.

¹ <http://www.scsk12.org/charter/files/2019/2019-Regional-Seats-Analysis.pdf>

Small-school Setting

As previously indicated, there are currently two traditional public middle schools and one traditional public high school in Cordova. One middle school and the high school are large, with enrollments of more than 700 and 2,000 students, respectively. While the other middle school currently serves approximately 400 students, both middle schools are about 30% under-enrolled, which means a much larger student body upon reaching enrollment capacity at both schools. Further, while some parents may prefer a large school setting for their child(ren), other parents may wish to send their child(ren) to a small school but do not have the option to currently do so in Cordova. We intentionally designed our school to be small to keep class sizes down, to provide an individualized learning environment, and to cultivate a family-like school culture. By year six of operation, we will be operating at capacity with enrollment capped at 525 total students across grades 6 through 12. Our school will provide parents seeking a small school environment for their child(ren) an option that does not currently exist in Cordova. To evidence this demand for a small school setting in Cordova, in approximately two weeks' time, MSE collected more than 500 signatures of parents with school-aged children who support MSE's opening in Cordova.

STEM-focused Academic Program

In addition to offering students and parents access to a small school setting, MSE will implement a STEM-focused academic program. MSE is currently engaged in the process of becoming a STEM-certified school through the TNDOE. MSE aims to complete all required components of the certification rubric by the end of SY 2019-20 and seeks to earn certification by the end of SY 2020-21. Additionally, MSE's STEM focus is now embedded across all areas of our schools. Below are the key components of our STEM programming:

- Technology: Central to implementing STEM activities and furthering our STEM focus, we have allocated funds to procuring technology. The middle and high school will have a fully outfitted computer lab with 30 desktop computers, all science and math classes will have a 3-D printer, and every grade level will have a designated mobile lab. In addition, we will purchase devices (e.g., iPads, Chromebooks) to enable a 2:1 ratio. Teachers across disciplines will incorporate technology-driven instruction and activities, enabling students to master critical technology skills. Elective teachers will also be required to implement technology in their instructional plans, ensuring that students receive ample exposure.
- Certifications: MSE is formulating plans to offer a Google certification class to high school students as an elective, which will teach them how to fully utilize the Google suite, as well as leverage technology for educational, as well as for future professional, purposes.
- Enriched Science and Mathematics Instruction: All middle school students will take a coding class as an elective. The course will implement the code.org STEM-focused curricula. Additionally, at the middle school, all students will spend more hours in science than at traditional public schools. More specifically, MSE middle school students will have seven-or-eight 45-minute periods a week in science classes as compared with the traditional average of 5 periods a week. Additionally, high school students will be provided with opportunities to take additional science and mathematics courses outside of what is minimally required for graduation. Based on enrollment, interest, and need, we will offer more rigorous science and mathematics classes that provide STEM-related instruction, including (but not limited to) Advanced Placement (AP) Statistics, AP Calculus, and AP Biology.
- STEM Activities: We will have an in-school STEM festival every year. This one-day festival will involve students preparing and presenting STEM-related projects to their peers, parents, and teachers. In addition, we will invite outside professionals who work in STEM fields to attend and participate.

Finally, we will offer robust STEM-focused extracurricular activities, including Science Olympiad, Robotics Club, and 3-D Printing Club.

Track Record of Academic, Operational, and Financial Success

MSE's middle and high school has been in operation in the Hickory Hill neighborhood of Memphis since 2010 and has consistently been high-performing and has a solid track record of academic, operational, and financial success. As explained above, a significant number of Cordova traditional public middle and high school seats are low-quality as measured by SCS's internally created metrics. MSE will replicate the best practices that have resulted in strong academic, operational, and financial outcomes, offering parents a public alternative to the low-quality public options currently available in Cordova. The following outlines MSE's most recent academic, operational, and financial track record at the middle and high school levels:

- On SCS's 2016-17 School Performance Framework (SPF), which measures academic achievement and growth, college graduation and readiness, and school climate, MSE ranked #8 of 78 middle and high schools in the district and #4 of all charter schools in Shelby County.
- In 2017-18, MSE ranked #12 of 82 middle and high schools in the district and #6 of all charter schools in Shelby County on the School Performance Framework.
- Among the 42 high schools in Shelby County, MSE ranked #8 on the 2017-18 School Performance Framework. At the time of submission of this statement, 2019 SPF data are unavailable.
- In English/Language Arts proficiency, MSE has performed in the top 20% of all high schools in the district over the past two academic years. Further, MSE students improved their TNReady test results on all subjects in all grade levels in 2019.
- MSE has consistently achieved strong TVAAS scores over the past 5 years, achieving a Level 4 or 5 in four of the last five years. Over the last 9 years, MSE has never received a score below a Level 3. In 2019, MSE received a TVAAS score of 3.
- Since its first graduating class in 2014, MSE has consistently graduated nearly 100% of its seniors.
- MSE has significantly increased its ACT score average over the past 5 years (from 13.8 in 2014 to 18.8 in 2018) and is ranked in the top quartile of all SCS high schools in ACT average.
- MSE ranks #5 among all SCS high school in terms of the percentage of its graduates who are "College Ready" (i.e., score a 21 or higher on the ACT and graduate on time).
- In 2019, MSE's graduate rate was 98% -- the third highest among the SCS district.
- MSE received the highest operational scorecard among all SCS charter schools in 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018. In 2019, MSE's operational scored was 4.69, far exceeding expected levels.

Met or Exceeded All Application Requirements

As scored by SCS charter application reviewers, MSE's charter school application met or exceeded all requirements set forth in the Tennessee Department of Education's Application for a Public Charter School applying to open in the 2020-21 school year. Due the recently passed Board policy referenced above, SCS scored one section, 1.2 Enrollment Summary, as partially meeting standards. However, the sole justification for the rating is the newly-adopted policy. SCS did not note any deficiencies in MSE's amended application, indicating that SCS agrees that MSE will offer a high-quality public middle and high school option to students and families residing in Cordova.